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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore and reflect on my own emotions while carrying out a research process and on their effect on the research and on myself as a researcher. After a brief literature review of the ways in which researcher emotions are perceived in qualitative research in the field of social sciences, I offer a reflective account of my own experience and suggest that researcher emotions can serve both as additional data and as an analyzing tool, as well as being a factor in the professional development of researchers.

Keywords

Researcher Emotions, Researcher's Professional Development, Qualitative Research, Emotions as Data, Emotions an Annualizing Tool

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Researcher Emotions as Data, a Tool and a Factor in Professional Development

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The purpose of this paper is to explore and reflect on my own emotions while carrying out a research process and on their effect on the research and on myself as a researcher. After a brief literature review of the ways in which researcher emotions are perceived in qualitative research in the field of social sciences, I offer a reflective account of my own experience and suggest that researcher emotions can serve both as additional data and as an analyzing tool, as well as being a factor in the professional development of researchers. Keywords: Researcher Emotions, Researcher's Professional Development, Qualitative Research, Emotions as Data, Emotions as an Analyzing Tool

Introduction

During the interview, he expressed self-confidence and portrayed a perfect image of success. I felt envy... this took me to my most insecure places. The question of whether these emotions jeopardize the interview or the research made me dizzy.

This excerpt, taken from my researcher's diary, describes the thoughts I had during an interview I conducted in the second year of my Ph.D. research. The emotions I experienced shocked me because I knew that "Researchers are exhorted to neutralize or hide themselves behind a veil of objectivity" (Chesney, 2001, p. 127). Instead, I was experiencing an emotional storm. After discussing the issue of my emotions during the interview with my academic supervisor, I decided to explore the emotional challenges researchers often face and how these emotions can be best exploited to benefit research and researchers. This paper summarizes my thoughts on the subject.

The essay begins with a brief literature review on the emotional challenges a researcher faces when carrying out qualitative research. The second section presents some suggestions on exploiting these emotions to promote the research agenda: how these emotions function as additional research data and as a data-analysis tool. I also explore how awareness of these emotions may augment the researcher's professional development. Finally, I suggest possible directions for future research.

Literature Review: Researcher Emotions

The role of research has become more significant than ever in recent years, due to society's need to support decision-making processes by basing them on objective research findings (Gordon & Porter, 2009; Kontorovich & Hazzan, 2014). It is therefore important to understand every facet of the researcher's role, including the emotional aspect.

Based on the Cartesian paradigm of rationalism, Western society has embraced a belief that it is harmful to rely on feelings and emotions, as opposed to "rational thinking," when making decisions (Elster, 1999). However, a growing body of evidence across various disciplines suggests that there is more to human rationality than reason-based judgments. While cognitive reasoning tends to promote a logical form of rationality, emotions tend to support a

wider form of rationality. For example, research results indicate that individuals who have greater trust in their emotions can predict the outcomes of future events better than can individuals who have less trust in their emotions (Pham, Lee, & Stephen, 2012).

The literature reveals two central approaches towards researcher emotions – traditional and feminist. The traditional approach lauds the disassociation between cognition and emotion, and instructs researchers to maintain objectivity and an emotional disconnection from the research object (Chesney, 2001). In contrast, the feminist point of view holds that the emotional labor that researchers perform should be acknowledged (Blee, 1998; Coffey, 1999; Gilbert, 2010; Haynes, 2006).

Researchers often experience a wide range of emotions throughout the research process: from curiosity about a certain phenomenon to frustration (Chong, 2008; Lanas, 2010); from empathy towards their participants (Lalor, Begley, & Devane, 2006; Wray, Markovic, & Manderson, 2007) to fear of them (Blee, 1998). This wide range of emotions during the research has reportedly resulted, in some cases, in the researcher experiencing phenomena ranging from physical pain (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2009; Rager, 2005) to sexual intercourse with participants (Coffey, 1999). Coffey (1999) summarized this as follows:

We can and do feel joy, pain, hurt, excitement, anger, love, confusion, satisfaction, loss, happiness and sadness. Emotional connectedness to the processes and practices of fieldwork, to analysis and writing, is normal and appropriate. It should not be denied, nor stifled. It should be acknowledged, reflected upon, and even seen as a fundamental feature of well-executed research. Having no emotional connection to the research endeavor, setting or people is indicative of a poorly executed project. (p. 158)

Since emotional connectedness to every aspect of a research project has the potential of being beneficial, it is not surprising that the research of emotions has become “a vibrant and continuously expanding field” (Kleres, 2011, p. 182) in different disciplines such as sociology (Clough, 2008), organizational studies (Briner, 2004), and education (Schutz, 2014).

The existing literature on researcher emotions can be divided into two main categories: Personal reflective accounts, and research on this subject. In some cases of personal reflective accounts, the exploration of researcher emotions develops as an ancillary focus during the course of another project, not necessarily intentionally (e.g., Dunn, 1991; Haynes, 2006; Lanas, 2010; McKenna, 2007; Munkejord, 2009). In most cases, these personal accounts have to do with sensitive topics such as people with cancer, child abuse, single mothers of children with ASH or ADHD (Li, 2008). Such sensitive topics are expected to evoke researcher emotions as, indeed, Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, and Liamputtong (2009) found in their research. Dickson-Swift and her colleagues executed one of the few studies whose declared objective was to study researcher emotions during qualitative research on sensitive topics. They revealed various emotional and physiological phenomena that arose as a consequence of the researchers' interactions with their interviewees, such as estrangement from friends and family members, sleeping apart from their spouses, experiencing hot flashes and redness in the face during the interview, and a feeling of suffocation.

Researcher Emotions as Research Data and an Analysis Tool

In qualitative research, the researcher herself (or himself) is expected to constitute a significant research tool (Ellingson, 2006; Finlay, 2002). Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen (1993) describe the advantages of this perspective: “The human instrument is a wonderful data-

processing organism. It is more sensitive to various shades of meaning and more able to appropriately respond to them than the most elaborate nonhuman instruments that might be imagined” (p. 107).

If the researcher is indeed a sensitive data-processing tool, what qualities foster this engagement with the raw data and the research process? Some researchers include the researcher's age, gender, life experience, education, and even body as possible filters (Coffey, 1999; Ellingson, 2006; Gilbert, 2010; Johnson & Clarke, 2003). Miles and Huberman (1994) refer to “inherent (researcher) biases” like effects of the researcher on the study participants and the effects of the study participants on the researcher, and they and other scholars (e.g., Onwuegbuzie, Leech, & Collins, 2008) call upon researchers to acknowledge these biases. Although many aspects of this issue merit discussion, following the work of other researchers in the field (Chong, 2008; Coffey, 1999; Ellingson, 2006; Gilbert, 2010; Haynes, 2006; Rager, 2005; Sear & McLean, 2008), I would like to concentrate here only on researcher emotions as research data and a tool for gathering, analyzing, and interpreting data (e.g., Blee, 1998; Lanas, 2010; Munkejord, 2009).

To illustrate the manner in which researcher emotions function as additional research data, I will describe an example from my doctoral research. For that project, I studied the role of the homeroom teacher in Israeli high schools. The research was conducted at four different schools and the research tools I used were mostly interviews, non-participative observations, and analyses of relevant documents. Here is an excerpt from my research diary regarding one particular school:

In the teacher's lounge I felt as if I were one of them and not an outsider. When I entered the room, I recognized many of the faces and some people greeted me. I became part of the landscape. I also felt free to help myself to cookies on Tuesday and to make small talk and joke with the teachers. Today I even worked on one of the computers during the break I had between interviews. I like this school.

This episode demonstrates a strong sense of belonging. After analyzing this and other episodes I had recorded in my diary regarding this particular school, I acknowledged that I had very strongly expressed the desire to fit in. The next step was to ask myself how this strong sense of belonging could help me understand and analyze my data.

I reread the data from this school and realized that I had often heard, both in interviews and in private conversations, expressions such as “the school is my home,” “I love my school,” and “teachers like working here.” Another striking finding was the absence of teacher complaints. There was some criticism, but no complaints. During the first round of interview analysis, which I did before reading the research diary, I interpreted this as indicative of a positive school organizational climate (Schein, 1990), but I had not identified the source of this climate. Upon analysis of the additional data from the diary, another possible explanation was revealed: These expressions indicate a strong desire of the teachers to belong to the school organization (Maslow, 1970), and this could be the motivation teachers have to become homeroom teachers as well as the source of the positive organizational climate. The role of homeroom teacher in Israeli schools is very demanding and it was not clear to me why some teachers volunteer to fulfill this role. Recognizing the sense of belonging was the clue to understanding them. In the interviews that followed this revelation, I added several questions to further explore this direction of investigation.

As this example illustrates, my personal emotions served as additional data and as a compass that directed me in my data analysis. This awareness of my personal emotions,

supported by the research data, inspired me to explore the role of Maslow's hierarchy of needs in the homeroom teachers' role in the final model of my research (Nutov & Hazzan, 2014).

Researcher Emotions as a Factor in Professional Development

My professional development as a researcher accelerated when I asked myself three questions: (1) Why did I feel envy during the interview [see the excerpt presented at the beginning of the Introduction section] and a wish to belong to a particular school [see the excerpt presented in the previous section]; (2) Do other researchers experience similar emotions and deliberations; and (3) Am I, in any way, jeopardizing my research by not being completely objective?

The answer to the second question was very simple thanks to the authors of personal accounts I read: Yes, other researchers have similar experiences (Blee, 1998; Chong, 2008; Downey, Hamilton, & Catterall, 2007). The first question, as I came to realize, was not really an important one. A better question was: What can I learn from this experience and how can it contribute to my research? This question stimulated my thinking, turned the research process into a growth experience, and enabled me to understand myself and to appreciate my emotions, fears, and motivations (Rosenblatt, 2001).

I learned from this experience not to be shocked by emotions that appear in different research situations, but rather to make room for them in the research process. For these emotions to be useful, the researcher should first record them carefully in a research diary as they are, without any "editorial changes" (no analyses or judgements regarding acceptability or shame, etc.). The second stage should be an analysis of these emotions with the objective of identifying them and their origins. The next step is a triangulation with the other research data. If the researcher's emotions are compatible with the participants' reports, the researcher's emotions can be treated as additional research data, as the existing accounts already suggested (Emerald & Carpenter, 2015; Hubbard, Backett-Milburn, & Kemmer, 2001). If there is no match, the researcher may take it as indication that the research structure should be revisited carefully. It may be worth gathering additional data or checking the interview protocol. That said, I would like to note that I have not found even one single account that reported a mismatch between researcher emotions and participant reports. Finally, the entire process should be reflected on, including an examination of whether or not the researcher's emotions added value to the research.

The third question I asked myself, about the legitimacy of incorporating subjective experiences into research, was also productive and it helped me shape my perception of the reliability and validity of qualitative research. First, I followed Long and Johnson (2000), Sarantakos (1994), Silverman (2011), and other scholars in their use of the terms reliability and validity in the context of qualitative research. Second, I believe that the inclusion of researcher emotions as data and as an analyzing tool can contribute to the transparency of the qualitative research and thus strengthen and enhance its reliability and validity.

The third question also raises another issue: Can a qualitative researcher be objective during his (or her) research as the traditional approach calls for, or should the researcher acknowledge his (or her) subjectivity and include his (or her) emotions in the research report, as post-modern approach suggests? Brak-Lamy (2012), for example, explored the long history of this question as it is manifested in the field of anthropology. After pondering and studying this question, I agree with those scholars who believe that no researcher is objective and that the exploration of the researcher's subjectivity and its origins is of value to the actual research outcome (Collins & Cooper, 2014; Dickson-Swift et al, 2009; Emerald & Carpenter, 2015).

Another point I would like to highlight in this section is the role of the academic supervisor in the novice researcher's development process, which is of great significance

(Chesney, 2001; Golde, 2005; Johnson & Clarke, 2003; Nutov & Hazzan, 2011). I was very fortunate to have a supportive relationship with my academic supervisor, and during our meetings I felt free to raise any thought, idea, or dilemma. Security in knowing that I could say anything and that it would not be used against me enabled me to share with my supervisor the emotional storm I was experiencing [see the excerpt presented at the beginning of the Introduction section]. After hearing me out, my supervisor suggested that I record, in writing, at least ten occasions or situations in which I experienced emotional dilemmas from an ethical perspective. This was very good advice. This is what Munkejord (2009) calls a “methodological emotional reflexivity” process. Writing these dilemmas down, reading what I had written, and then analyzing these statements added to my growth process as a researcher. We even went a step further; my supervisor asked me whether I would like to present this issue to graduate students who were enrolled in a course on qualitative research that she was teaching at the time. My preparations for that presentation led me to learn more about researcher emotions, and the students’ positive responses encouraged me to deepen my interest in this subject (Nutov & Hazzan, 2011).

Concluding Thoughts

In this essay, I began exploring the role of researcher emotions as additional research data, as an analyzing tool, and as a factor in researchers’ professional developmental processes. The paper aims to add to the growing body of knowledge on the contribution of researcher emotions to the research process (e.g., Brak-Lamy, 2012; Chong, 2008; Holtan, Gilbert, 2010; Strandbu, & Eriksen, 2014). Previous personal accounts on researcher emotions were usually written after conducting research on sensitive topics (Li, 2008), whereas my personal account is slightly different. It was written after researching a topic that is relatively not a sensitive one, namely educational administration, demonstrating that even such topics can evoke a wide range of emotions as well. Given this, I suggest that researcher emotions should be acknowledged and dealt with explicitly as an integral part of any research.

Furthermore, my reflective account, as well as other accounts (e.g., Bloor, Fincham, & Sampson, 2007; Dickson-Swift et al., 2009), highlight the support researchers receive or should receive from their supervisors or from the research community. Any researcher, not only those involved in sensitive subjects, needs a safe place where he or she can explore how the researcher’s emotions contribute to the research. I believe that investigating researcher emotions can provide a theoretical framework for future studies on researchers’ professional development.

Finally, I have not explored the possibility of a negative impact of researcher emotions on the research because this essay was based on personal reflections; therefore, it should not be considered a comprehensive study of researcher emotions. Future research should explore both positive and negative sides of the issue.

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